




SLA Forum, Vol 32, No 4 (2009)

[Home](#)[About](#)[Log](#)

[In](#)[Register](#)[Search](#)[Current](#)[Archives](#)[Announcements](#)[Submissions](#)[Advertising](#)[SLA](#)

[Home](#) > [Vol 32, No 4 \(2009\)](#) > [Kumaran](#)

Font Size:  


<http://www.slaforum.sk.ca> Volume 32 Number 4 (2009)

Libraries Matter: Different communities and different approaches

Saskatchewan has a very diverse community and is still growing. According to the 2006 Census, there are over 32% First Nations people who are either recorded as Mtis, Aboriginal, or North American Indian, 18% of the Saskatchewan population who call themselves Canadians, and the rest of the population is comprised of various diverse older immigrant populations such as Polish, German, Ukrainian, Irish, East Indian, Pakistani, and so on. Over the past year, the Saskatchewan government has increased its new immigrant population with programs like SINP (Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program), and the Federal Governments Temporary Foreign Worker Program. There is also the usual influx of new immigrants, international students, and refugees every year. Our public libraries are trying to provide services to all newcomers as they have strived to do in the past, along with services for existing users. But the challenge for all libraries over the years has been attracting those communities that do not typically come into libraries. Why arent some groups coming into the library and what can we do to attract them?

Saskatchewan public libraries have a long history of serving various patrons with programs in art, computers, and literacy, as well as adult and childrens programming. In spite of the variety in programming (sometimes in different languages), there are still some populations that do not use the library: some new immigrants, some First Nations people, and many homeless people. Some of the key reasons why these populations dont consider coming into the library might be economic, communication or literacy issues. Other factors could be cultural ones. In some

cultures libraries are seen as academic institutions and therefore not a place for personal research or leisure pursuits, other cultures might have a fear of providing personal information to a public entity such as a library; new immigrants may not know that public libraries have lending policies and that usage is free or that computers are available for research or email purposes as well. These might be some of the external barriers.

Public libraries need to think in terms of marketing to specific target groups, to create awareness about libraries in their communities. We need to develop outreach programs where librarians and staff can find gateways into these new communities, and meet with community leaders, or create focus groups to help investigate this problem.

But before any marketing is done, research is important to determine the immediate needs of these communities. A new immigrant may be more interested in finding a job, a house to settle in, and a school for their children, rather than browsing the novel or movie collection at their local public library. First Nations people might want to research their aboriginal ancestors or learn how to use Kijiji to find rental homes. It is important to know what a community's needs are before designing cookie-cutter services for all groups.

For instance, with homeless people their immediate needs might be to be able to use a phone and find a place for the night. Libraries might serve these groups by having phone numbers and addresses of shelters and a free phone that patrons can use in the library. As well, exceptions and allowances might need to be made with identification requirements and borrowing privileges for this group.

Once a decision is made to market to a certain group, strategies should be in place. There is no point in trying to reach a group with pamphlets in English if language is an issue. Information must be communicated in places, languages and using media that is most suited to the targeted community. Most of these communities are realistic and already know that they cannot expect to have all their needs met. But as potential service providers, public libraries' priorities need to be set and met as closely as possible.

Apart from the external barriers to library use by these communities, there are also internal barriers within libraries. Many library staff may not be aware that they have a multilingual collection for their Hispanic patrons, for instance. In many cases staff could misinterpret a shy patron with language issues as being rude or unfriendly. Library staff need to be proactive in finding out what a patron might need. It is important for staff members to be in touch with various communities through outreach programs, community analyses, partnership programming, etc. We need to develop relationships with different organizations in our communities such as the Open Door Society, Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada, to name a few, to stay on top of the kinds of issues coming from various immigrant populations and where we can help as librarians. Library programmers can create specific programs that would be of interest to these communities learning computer skills to find a new job; update the library collection just for these groups if you have a large immigrant population from Pakistan collect more Arabic books, have a couple of popular Arabic magazines; hire a librarian who specializes in these specific areas multicultural librarian, Aboriginal collections librarian, etc.

Using a needs assessment, niche focused marketing, and various targeted programming activities, our libraries will stay relevant and useful to all communities. If every public library questions whether it truly represents its diverse communities and decides to set strategies in place to work on this, Saskatchewan public libraries will be great places for all communities to visit.

Submitted by

Maha Kumaran,

with Lorraine Salt

Members of the SLA Advocacy Committee

E-mail the Advocacy committee at sla.advocacy@sasktel.net with any comments or suggestions.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Canada License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/).

Forum: The Journal of the Saskatchewan Library Association (ISSN 1918-6746)